

# VLADIMIR'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY: DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND THE TAKING OF KHERSON

David K. Prestel

Но есть на небесахъ Богъ  
открывающій тайны  
*Kniga Proroka Danila II: 28*

Есть въ царстве твоемъ мѡужъ  
въ которомъ духъ святаго Бога  
*Kniga Proroka Danila V: 11<sup>1</sup>*

In the *Rus' Primary Chronicle* (*Povest' vremennykh let*) under the year 6494 (986) we read that the pagan Prince Vladimir of Rus' was visited by proselytizing delegations from the Muslim Volga Bulgars, German Roman Catholics, Jewish Khazars, and Orthodox

---

<sup>1</sup> *Tolkovaia Bibliia*. "But there is in heaven, a God revealing mysteries"; "There is in your kingdom a man, in whom is the spirit of the Holy God." [All translations of the *Primary Chronicle* in this study are the author's.] The first edition of this Bible was published in Saint Petersburg from 1904 through 1913 as a supplement to the journal, *Strannik*. The second edition came out in 1987 through the Institute for Bible Translation, Stockholm. The second edition is in three volumes and the quotations from Daniel are in vol. 2.

Byzantines.<sup>2</sup> The Greek representative, who is called a “filosof,” begins with a short criticism of the faiths represented by each of the preceding delegations and then launches into a rather lengthy summary of biblical history, which encompasses human experience from Creation to the Last Judgment.<sup>3</sup> Although the summary has been described as a chronological history that moves from the beginning of time to the end of the world, a closer look reveals that this is not entirely accurate.<sup>4</sup>

In a manner common to conversion accounts, the philosopher’s summary is actually constructed in dialogue form with the Greek responding to questions posed by Vladimir.<sup>5</sup> In the first

---

<sup>2</sup> PVL, 84,17–106,14. It is often referred to as the *Primary Chronicle*, as will be done in this study. The shortened form “PVL” will be used to refer to the collation and paradosis of 2003 (see “Works Cited”). The numbers after “PVL” represent the column and line numbers of that edition. It is possible that the story of the foreign delegations is a later interpolation for, as S. H. Cross points out, the distinction between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches expressed here is most likely an anachronism, because the Schism of 1054, which separated the two churches, was still several decades in the future when these visits took place. Cross, however, seems to overstate the differences between Byzantine and Catholic Christianity noted in the text, as there is certainly no claim that the two differ as much between themselves as they both do from Islam and Judaism. Indeed, the Greek “philosopher” clearly states that the Roman faith “сз нами мало развращена,” (“with us it differs little,” part 1, lines 86: 25–26). See Cross, *Russian Primary Chronicle*, 245n92.

<sup>3</sup> PVL, 86,8–106,14. For a discussion of possible influences on the “Philosopher’s Speech,” which he considers an independent work of the chronicler, see Shakhmatov, “Povest’ vremennykh let,” 122–149.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Petro Bilaniuk calls the speech a catechesis that “begins with an account of the creation of the world and includes a summary of the major events of the history of salvation, Old Testament prophecies, and their fulfillment in the New Testament.” Bilaniuk, “Laurentian Chronicle,” 93.

<sup>5</sup> The account of the conversion of Saul (St. Paul) in Acts 9 is a likely model, though Saul’s questions are quite brief, as are the responses of Jesus. Dialogue is implicit in biblical religion. Amos Wilder writes that it “takes us to the heart of biblical religion, namely prayer itself,” *Early Christian Rhetoric*, 45. Further, W. Reed notes that “the dialogic form is a fundamental characteristic of the Jewish and Christian writings as they represent a dramatically interactive communication between remarkably different levels of existence, between a strikingly transcendent God and the notably earthbound people to whom he speaks.” Reed, *Dialogues of*

question, Vladimir inquires whether it is true, as the Jewish Khazars stated, that the Greeks and the Germans worship one whom the Jews had crucified. The philosopher replies that this was indeed the case, for the prophets, whom the Jews had killed, had said that God would become incarnate and would be crucified, buried, and resurrected and would rise on the third day from the dead; and further, referring to the events of AD 70, that God had punished Israel for its unbelief by allowing the Romans to destroy the cities and by scattering the nation among the peoples of the world. Vladimir then asks why God came to earth and suffered such pain. The philosopher replies that if Vladimir wants to hear the story, he will tell it from the beginning and commences his account of human history with the creation of heaven and earth as given in Genesis.<sup>6</sup> Although the account is presented chronologically, from this point on, its true beginning, initiated by Vladimir's question, is the Incarnation, that is, Christ's coming in the flesh, and his resultant death and resurrection, which identifies the philosopher's summary as *Heilsgeschichte* or salvation history.<sup>7</sup> In this view, all history is God's revelation of his plan of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

---

*the Word*, 36. The naiveté of the pagan Vladimir's questions, although at times theologically astute, emphasizes his earthbound nature. As Bilaniuk points out ("Laurentian Chronicle," 94), the philosopher's speech is patterned after the catechism of the protodeacon and martyr, Stephen, in Acts 7. Stephen's defense at his trial was not, strictly speaking, a dialogue, as the entire speech was in response to a single question from the high priest concerning whether the testimony of the witnesses against him was true. Though similar in spirit, the two accounts are quite different in the events from salvation history that are presented. They share, however, the Christian conviction that all history culminates in Jesus Christ.

<sup>6</sup> PVL, beginning with 87,23.

<sup>7</sup> In the flesh (*en sarki*) here simply denotes the earthly existence of Jesus (I John 4:2). A good source for *Heilsgeschichte* is Cullmann, *Christ and Time*. The term "salvation history" is not used in the New Testament, but its core meaning is expressed by "oikonomia" (dispensatio) as it is used in Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9 to designate God's "plan of salvation." The word "Heilsgeschichte" as used by Cullmann is rather controversial among theologians as he himself has acknowledged, *Heil als Geschichte*, 56–60. Here it is used in its general Christian sense: God's plan of salvation as presented in Scripture.

<sup>8</sup> A very similar version in Russian of the "redemptive history" section of this paper (pp. 4–11) appeared in 2011 in my article, "Plody provideniia: iazycheskaia i sviashchennaia istoriia v Povesti vremennykh let," *Rossica antiqua* (2011/2): 26–33. In both articles a basic explication of the

Past events had occurred according to the purposes of God and contained messages that require interpretation. Similarities between events revealed the divine plan for humanity and led to a “detemporalization” of historical events.<sup>9</sup> For Christian thinkers from the early church fathers on, there are two defining events in human history, the Garden of Eden and the Cross.<sup>10</sup> Once humans used their freedom against their creator and fell into sin, salvation history becomes an account of transgressions and rebellion on the one side, and God’s mercy and just discipline on the other. In his providence, God’s ultimate purpose, which is accomplished in the Incarnation, is to reconcile humankind with its Creator. According to salvation history, the trials and difficulties faced by humanity are actually acts of mercy, for instead of the destruction they deserve, humans are given numerous opportunities to practice the repentance that will lead to redemption.<sup>11</sup> The biblical history that the philosopher relates to Vladimir differs from secular history in that the events that it recounts are not important in themselves, but are significant only as they reflect salvation history, that is, as they reveal either a turning to or a turning away from God.<sup>12</sup> In addition, however, there is another theme that is developed throughout the account. God chose Abraham to be the progenitor of his chosen people and he blessed them despite their frequent unfaithfulness. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and Solomon were provided to lead God’s people, but despite the wisdom and leadership of these rulers, the people

---

workings of *Heilsgeschichte* serves as a context for interpreting other parts of the *PVL*.

<sup>9</sup> Goetz, “Concept of Time,” 164–165.

<sup>10</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 172. The qualification must be made that there are two significant events in human history up to the present time. Christian sacred history as a whole, however, has a beginning, middle, and end, which is Christ’s coming in glory to set up his kingdom (*parousia*) (181).

<sup>11</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 183–184. Gregory of Nyssa saw time as a “perpetual movement toward a different state,” which could be either good or evil. As it is worked out in God’s plan (*oikonomia*), it is always directed toward the good,” as quoted in Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 118. For the views of time in providence for the Cappadocians in general see *ibid.*, 114–119.

<sup>12</sup> In contrast to secular history, in redemptive history it is not criteria established by humans that are significant, for it is by divine selection that a particular event becomes a “point in time” (*kairos*), Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 39.

continued in sin and, under Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the kingdom was divided into two parts. In the northern part under Jeroboam the people worshipped golden calves and in the south Baal worship was once again practiced. God sent prophets to warn his people of their sin, but the people did not listen and began to kill his messengers. Because of Israel's rejection, God spoke through the prophets and warned that He would reject Israel and, quoting Malachi 1.11, "from the east to the west my name will be glorified among the nations [Gentiles—DP]... In every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations."<sup>13</sup> In this section the philosopher cites a rather large number of biblical prophecies, which prompts Vladimir to ask when they will be fulfilled. The philosopher answers, "All this was accomplished earlier when God became flesh."<sup>14</sup> This is the central event in salvation history, fulfilling promises made previously and thus becoming what Karl Löwith calls a *perfectum praesens* for all that occurs subsequently.<sup>15</sup> For the chroniclers, the Rus' are, of course, among the peoples to whom God's grace and redemption are to be revealed and the Incarnation, an event that occurred almost a thousand years previously, demands a response from Vladimir. His subsequent actions leading up to the conversion, as recorded in the *Primary Chronicle*, should, therefore, be viewed within the context of the philosopher's account of sacred history. In this study we will examine the *Primary Chronicle* story of the conversion of Vladimir, and in particular the account of the taking of Kherson, in the light of salvation history and the Christian concept of divine providence.<sup>16</sup> In doing so I hope to demonstrate that the Kherson legend, long considered to be a clumsy melding of contradictory versions, actually plays an important role in the

---

<sup>13</sup> "Отъ востока и до запада имя мое прослави ся въ языцехъ. И на всякомъ мѣстѣ приносить ся кадило имени моему и жертва чиста, зане велие имя въ языцехъ" *PVL*, 98,23–98,27.

<sup>14</sup> "яко уже преже съ възътъ ся все, егда Богъ възплзти ся." *PVL*, 101,28.

<sup>15</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> The "Legend of Kherson" ("Korsunskaja legenda") has been much discussed by investigators. A. A. Shakhmatov, because of internal contradictions in the text, sees the *Chronicle* version as a rather clumsy combination of differing accounts of the conversion. Shakhmatov, *Razyskaniia*, 133–161. Also see Likhachev, *Povest' vremennykh let*, 2: 335–337; Müller, "Die Chronik-Erzählung," 430–448. Müller sees the *Primary Chronicle* version as a combination of two sources, the "Korsun Legend" and what he calls the "Mission Legend."

chroniclers' attempt to locate significant events of Rus' history within the broader coordinates of salvation history.

For Maximus Confessor (whom Jaroslav Pelikan calls the principal exponent of Orthodox spirituality in the seventh century, and John Meyendorff, the "father of Byzantine theology"), the world, though it exists as a separate reality outside of God, is still the recipient of his love and providence (*pronoia*).<sup>17</sup> In this sense the world is not autonomous, but "was created in order to participate in God," who is the principle, the center and the end: the principle through creation, the center through providence, and the end through conclusion.<sup>18</sup> After the creation of the world and of mankind, which God pronounced to be good, God gave control over His creation to Adam, but he chose to submit to the world instead of to God. In an interpretation used by both Maximus and Gregory of Nyssa, the reference in Genesis 3:21 to the "garments of skin," which were given to Adam and Eve after the Fall, is to humankind's new situation, in which the animal side of human nature causes people to become the captives of their material senses and thus separated from God.<sup>19</sup> God's providence is still operative in the world, but it is now contextualized in the history of Israel in the Old Testament and in the ongoing history of the church after the Incarnation. After the Fall, God's purpose is to continue to actively participate in human history through human agents, in both an individual and corporate sense, who respond positively to his calling or reject it. It is the story of the positive agents that the Greek philosopher records in his account, but his is not the only instance of salvation history in the *Primary Chronicle*, for, in an abbreviated form, God's plan, especially as it affects the Gentile nations, is the subject of the opening story "откуда есть пошла русская земля" which begins the collection.<sup>20</sup>

The opening seems to be intended to provide a link between biblical salvation history and the history of Kievan Rus; it seeks to demonstrate how Rus' fits into God's plan for salvation.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> See Pelikan's "Introduction" to *Maximus Confessor*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> This is my paraphrase of a quotation from Maximus in Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> *PVL*, 0,2–0,3. "whence came the Rus' land." See also Eremin, *Lektsii*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> As Simon Franklin points out, for the compilers of the *Primary Chronicle*, the past was a constant source of authority: "It was an indispensable part of their mythmaking designs and methods," Franklin, "Borrowed Time," 165.

It contains quotations from a number of different sources, but the first part parallels rather closely the *Chronicle* of George Hamartolos, as it describes the division of the world among the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham and Japheth.<sup>22</sup> The region given to the descendants of each son is then described, as is the origin of the world's languages through the linguistic dispersion, which took place at Babel. After this brief introduction, attention quickly shifts to the Slavs and more particularly to the Polianians.

The Incarnation ushered in the times of the Gentiles as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets, and the chroniclers take special care to provide apostolic origins for Rus' Christianity. St. Andrew, teaching near Sinope in what is now Turkey and from there crossing the Black Sea to Kherson, sailed up the Dnieper to the future site of Kiev, where he blessed the hill on which the city was to be founded and set up a cross. As noted above, for Orthodox theologians, after the Fall, the world, originally created by God as perfect, became a place of confinement for humankind in which the devil was able to establish his wicked rule. Through the sanctification (blessing) of material objects and places, the Orthodox Church sought to reestablish created things in their true relationship to God.<sup>23</sup> In addition to claims of an apostolic foundation for the Rus' Church, the chroniclers apparently want to demonstrate in this passage that God's providence had set aside Kiev as a holy place, almost a millennium before Christianity was accepted by Vladimir.<sup>24</sup> In addition, God's providential work did not cease to affect the Polianians, the eventual inhabitants of Kiev and the corporate beneficiaries of God's grace. In the account of the founding of Kiev by Kii, Shchek, and Khoriv, we are told that they are "wise and judicious; and are called Polianians, and from them there are Polianians in Kiev until now."<sup>25</sup> Later, in a rather lengthy

---

<sup>22</sup> *Khronika Georgiia Amartola*, 58. For the citations from Hamartolos see Tvorogov, "Povest' vremennykh let," 99–113. Other sources are quoted as well including John Malalas, Anastasius of Sinai, Michael Syncellus, and the pseudo-Methodius of Patara: see Simon Franklin, "Some Apocryphal Sources," 1–27; A. A. Shakhmatov, "Povest' vremennykh let," 11–150; and Ranchin, "Khronika Georgiia Amartola," 52–69.

<sup>23</sup> Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 135.

<sup>24</sup> See Dvornik, *Idea of Apostolicity*, 263–264; Bilaniuk, "Laurentian Chronicle," 86–88; and Podskalsky, *Christentum und theologische Literatur*, 11–13.

<sup>25</sup> "Бяхуть бо мудри и съмысли и нарицаку ся Поляне отъ нихъ же Поляне Кыеве и до сего дьне." PVL, 9,19–9,21.

description of the various East Slavic tribes, we are told that each of them kept their own customs and laws, but that they, in contrast to the Derevlians, who lived as animals, and to other tribes, the Polianians kept the peaceful customs of their fathers and showed respect for their daughters-in-law, sisters, and mothers.<sup>26</sup> God's providence could also be revealed through other non-Christian peoples. When the Khazars demand tribute, the Polianians pay with a sword from each household. The Khazar leadership, however, is disturbed when they see the double-edged swords, as their weapons have only a single edge. They predict that they would soon be paying tribute to the Polianians. Significantly, the chronicler adds: "All this has occurred because they spoke not by their own will, but by God's command."<sup>27</sup>

Divine providence, of course, could benefit a people before their conversion to Christianity, for as Eusebius records in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Constantine the Great commemorated his victory over Maxentius at the Milvian bridge by erecting a monument with an inscription stating that by the sign of the cross, he had saved the city from a tyrant and had "restored to their ancient fame and splendor both the senate and the people of Rome."<sup>28</sup> Although Constantine's conversion opened a radically new era, because of the working of divine providence, there was continuity between the noble practices of ancient Rome and the new Christian era.<sup>29</sup> It appears likely that the chroniclers similarly wished to demonstrate that God's providence is evident even in the pagan history of Rus' and that a line of continuity stretches from the apostolic blessing of Kiev, through the noble practices of the Polianians, who are more favored than other tribes, to the eventual conversion of Vladimir.

As time progressed, the chroniclers demonstrated that God in his providence continued to bless the Kievan state. Its territory was expanded through the reigns of Oleg, Igor', and Sviatoslav, and Igor's wife, Ol'ga, even became a Christian.<sup>30</sup> Ol'ga's grandson, Vladimir, however, gained the throne through the murder of his brother Iaropolk and the first years of his reign were hardly

---

<sup>26</sup> PVL, 13,7–13,15.

<sup>27</sup> PVL, 17,14–15. See also Bilaniuk, "Laurentian Chronicle," 92.

<sup>28</sup> Eusebius, *History*, 370–371.

<sup>29</sup> Pelikan, *Mystery of Continuity*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> In terms of providence and, in actual fact, the baptism of Rus' was prepared for at least two generations before Vladimir. See Sverdlov, *Domogol'skaia Rus'*, 207–216.



## VLADIMIR'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

auspicious. He presided over a pagan resurgence, which resulted in the death of Christians, and was renowned for his sexual indulgence. In the number of his wives and concubines he is compared to King Solomon, but with the distinction that Solomon, though wise, came to ruin in the end, while Vladimir, though at first deluded, eventually found salvation and led the Rus' to conversion. This contrast is consistent with the development of salvation history. As O. Cullman states:

the history of salvation up to Christ unfolds... as a progressive reduction: mankind – the people of Israel – the remnant of Israel – the One, Christ... From that point, however, there appears an important change with respect to the principle of movement, which we have discerned... Rather, all further development unfolds so that from the center reached in the Resurrection of Christ the way no longer leads from the many to the One, but on the contrary, from the One, in progressive advance, to the many.<sup>31</sup>

Vladimir thus becomes a sort of reverse Solomon and the history of Rus' becomes a mirror image of the history of Israel, for rather than passing from light to darkness, Rus' by God's grace goes from darkness to light.

The chroniclers have begun speaking at this point of the conversion of Vladimir, but it seems, nonetheless, very strange that God would choose to work through the agency of a sinner such as the prince. Providence, as it is often depicted in Scripture, however, seldom follows a predictable course. Löwith notes that "unexpected accidents slip in and unthought-of occurrences intervene."<sup>32</sup> A contemporary theologian, E. Frank Tupper, points out that providence is often "scandalous," and uses the birth of Jesus as an example. Joseph's line of descent as presented in the Gospel of Matthew includes such questionable figures as Tamar, who played the harlot with her father-in-law Judah, Rahab the harlot of Jericho, Ruth the Moabitess, a despised people, and Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah), who had an adulterous relationship with David that resulted in her husband's death in battle by David's order. Thus, "schemers, harlots, adulterers—these women foreshadowed the role of the Virgin Mary, whose pregnancy constituted a scandal: She had not lived with her husband."<sup>33</sup> These women all participated actively in events that were subsequently used

---

<sup>31</sup> Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, 115–116.

<sup>32</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 253–254n8.

<sup>33</sup> Tupper, *Scandalous Providence*, 96.

to advance God's purposes. Their participation, moreover, illustrates the concurrence that functions when God acts in collaboration with human agents. Vladimir, too, was the unlikely choice of what we might again call "scandalous" providence. Not only was he a great sinner, but he was also of questionable birth. His mother was Malusha, the daughter of Malok/Malk of Liubech and the *kliuchnitsa* ("housekeeper") of Princess Ol'ga, but whatever that rank might signify, Rogneda, the daughter of Rogvolod of Polotsk, calls Vladimir the son of a slave when she rejects his marriage proposal.<sup>34</sup> Despite these numerous negative factors, Vladimir comes eventually to be receptive to divine initiative and accepts baptism. This acceptance is neither immediate nor simple, however, and the remainder of my analysis examines how the chroniclers describe the concurrence of God's purposeful action and Vladimir's receptivity to it.

From the chroniclers' perspective, the death of the Varangian martyrs was the low point in Vladimir's reign. It is followed, however, by quotations from the prophet Hosea and the Psalter affirming God's decision to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles, as well as by commentary to the effect that the devil, who has long considered Rus' his own, will soon lose it, for although the apostles had not been in Rus', their teachings spread throughout the world in the churches.<sup>35</sup> It is at this point that the account of the conver-

---

<sup>34</sup> PVL, 75,28–76,2. Rogneda's supposed words were "Не хощю розутьи робинича" ("I do not wish to take off the footwear of a slave's son"). Andrzej Poppe calls Malusha the housekeeper of Ol'ga and the concubine of Sviatoslav, who was from "an unfree court attendant's family," Poppe, "Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure," 333. In terms of providence there are similarities here with Gideon, who delivered Israel from the Midianites after a prolonged period of repression. Gideon himself expresses his unworthiness by noting that his family is the least in Manasseh and he is the youngest among them. He then has God prove his intentions through a series of tests (Judges 6).

<sup>35</sup> PVL, 83,16–83,22. The quotation is from Hosea 2:23, which actually deals with the restoration of Israel. Here, however, it is clearly used to refer to the Gentiles (more specifically, Rus'). There seems to be a contradiction in the reference to the apostles. Earlier in the *Primary Chronicle*, as we have seen, there is an account of the Apostle Andrew's journey to Rus'. Here, no apostolic visit is acknowledged. It is possible, as Müller maintains in *Die Taufe Russlands*, that the passage about the Apostle Andrew was added in the latter part of the 11th century, particularly as Ilarion, in his *Slovo o zakone i blagodati*, makes no mention of it. See also Vodoff, *Naissance*, 291–294 and Poppe, "Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure," 335–336. I should note that Demin maintains that there is no contradiction between the two entries as Andrew did

sion of Vladimir begins. The next entry is the visit of the various religious delegations described at the start of this article. Then we move from corporate providence, which had been visited on the Rus' nation from apostolic times, to individual providence, through which Prince Vladimir is called to repentance and baptism. The first step, then, is the series of religious visits culminating in the philosopher's speech. Vladimir is affected by the speech, especially the image of the Last Judgment with which it concludes, but in the end he refuses baptism because he wants to inquire more fully into the other faiths before making his decision. His boyars advise him to send his own people to examine each of the faiths, in order to get an unbiased view of their worship, and therefore, he sends delegations to the Bulgars, Germans and Greeks.<sup>36</sup> When the delegations return, the only positive report comes from the delegation that visited Constantinople, for they say that God truly dwelt there among men. When the reports are completed, the boyars state that if the Christian faith were bad, it would not have been accepted by Vladimir's grandmother, Olga, who was "мудрѣишии всѣхъ челоуѣкъ" ("who was wiser than all men"). Vladimir then asks his boyars where they should accept baptism, and they reply, "Wherever it pleases you."<sup>37</sup>

Without further elaboration, we are told that after a year had passed, Vladimir attacked the Greek city of Kherson. There is no motivation for the attack given in the text. We are informed only that Vladimir moves against the city with an armed force and the people barricade themselves inside. The siege threatens to be longstanding, but suddenly, one of the inhabitants, Anastasius by name, shoots an arrow on which were written directions for locating the city's water supply. At this moment, Vladimir looks to heaven and says that if the city is taken, he will accept baptism. Vladimir then cuts off the water supply, and the city falls.<sup>38</sup>

The passage describing the siege of Kherson presents many difficulties, not the least of which is the question of why Vladimir would attack Kherson when so recently he had been favorably disposed to the Greeks and their religion. In addition, we must ask

---

not teach Slavs during his trip and had, in fact, little to do with them, "Zametki po personologii," 54. For the relation of the chroniclers' account to Ilarion's *Slovo* and what I consider to be a successful reconciliation of the two versions, see Poppe, "Two Concepts," 497–500.

<sup>36</sup> PVL, 107,2–108,29

<sup>37</sup> PVL, 108,26–108,30.

<sup>38</sup> PVL, 109,17–109,23.

the related question: why Vladimir would expect the Christian God to help him conquer a Christian city? Poppe has convincingly proposed that the sequence of events described in the *Primary Chronicle* should be revised in rough correspondence to a contrasting account in the *Pamiat' i pokhvala* of Iakov Mnikh 11th–14th centuries), for it is more likely that Vladimir was baptized in Kiev on Epiphany in 6495 (January 6, 988), traveled to the Dnieper rapids to greet his bride, Anna Porphyrogenita, in the summer of 988 (6496), and then in 989 (6497) took Kherson, which was held by the rebel, Bardas Phocas, in fulfillment of his promise to Basil II.<sup>39</sup> This version certainly makes more historical sense than the rather clumsy rendition found in the *Primary Chronicle*, but I would submit that in the context of salvation history, the *Primary Chronicle* account of the conversion also achieves some consistency.<sup>40</sup> As we have seen, the role of Rus' within God's providential plan is linked in the beginning of the *Primary Chronicle* with the extension of the Gospel message to the descendants of Japheth, and later God worked providentially throughout the history of Rus' to prepare the people for baptism. The providential model for conversion itself, however, is provided by the philosopher's speech, placed near the beginning of the conversion account. It is here, therefore, that we should look for some answers to the puzzling questions surrounding the Kherson legend.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Poppe, "Political Background," 238–244; see also Poppe, "Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure," 329–334. Nothing is known about Iakov Mnikh beyond that he claimed twice at the beginning of the *Pamiat' i pokhvala* to be the author/compiler. Who he was and when he wrote has been the subject of a great deal of speculation, but to my knowledge, no real evidence has been put forward.

<sup>40</sup> Poppe writes: "For the author-compiler of the *Primary Chronicle*, the Kherson version was most reliable because it presented the most providential view of the conversion of Rus'. But as the author-compiler himself acknowledged, he was acquainted with the other versions, which were probably as brief and prosaic as the records in the 'Memory and Eulogy,'" "Political Background," 242; and Vodoff, *Naissance*, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Other explanations have been offered by Francis Butler and M. N. Virolainen. Butler writes that the chronicler wanted to present Vladimir as a brilliant innovator and as the ruler of a great and independent land. "The account as it stands underlines both of these characteristics. Vladimir has the good sense to accept the philosopher's arguments and the advice of his emissaries, but he is not so weak as merely to accept the Greek religion. Instead he seizes it by force," Butler, *Enlightener of Rus'*, 41–49. Virolainen compares the "Kherson Legend" to the tale about

## VLADIMIR'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

First of all, according to the philosopher, God works through nations, but in addition, throughout the history of Israel, he selected in each generation an individual, like Moses, Samuel, or David, who served as the agent of divine will. The philosopher addresses his speech to Vladimir, who clearly is the agent for Rus', but the timing is according to a divine plan that is known only to God and cannot be hurried. The image of the Last Judgment that concludes the speech affects Vladimir, for we are told that he sighs when he sees those going to Hell depicted, but he is not yet ready to act.<sup>42</sup> The second significant modeling element we find in the speech is the emphasis on the times of the Gentiles. At one point we are told that the story of Gideon and the fleece serves as a type for the baptism of the Gentiles, for Gideon put the fleece on the ground to test God and it remained dry while the rest of the earth was wet and then became wet while everything else was dry. The miracle signifies that at first there was dryness among the Gentiles while the Jews were wet, but later the Gentiles possessed the dew while the Jews were dry.<sup>43</sup> The philosopher presents this typological interpretation just before his depiction of the Last Judgment. The decision at this point is clearly Vladimir's, but he chooses to test God as Gideon did, and a year later he makes his baptism contingent upon God's granting him victory over Kherson. Vladimir's testing of God is similar to that of Gideon's, as they both occur in a battle situation in which they are given victory only with God's support. Vladimir also resembles Gideon in that they both destroy the idols that their people worship in place of God.<sup>44</sup> In a reversal typical of the diptych of salvation history, however, Gideon destroyed the idols to Baal

---

Vladimir's conquest of Polotsk and his marriage to Rogneda. The order of events in the "Legend," which is similar to that in Rogneda's tale, is determined by a folklore code, which reflects an accepted tradition and system of meaning, "Avtor teksta istorii," 33–52. Both factors may have played some role in the chroniclers' selection and ordering of the material, but I would submit that a desire to highlight the role of providence is primary.

<sup>42</sup> *PVL*, 106,8–106,12.

<sup>43</sup> *PVL*, 105,11–105,20. The victory of Gideon over the Midianites and Amalekites is clearly an act of providence, as Gideon is instructed to reduce his large army to three hundred men, and yet is still victorious over a great multitude of the enemy, Judges 7.

<sup>44</sup> Gideon was called Jerubbaal because he destroyed the altar of Baal, Judges 6: 27–32.

before the test, and Vladimir only after God supported him and he was converted.

The third important element in the philosopher's account that we should note is its focus on the Incarnation. As remarked earlier, references to Christ's birth, death, and resurrection open the account and Old Testament prophecies are used throughout to highlight it. The philosopher spends a significant amount of time on the Gospel story, and all Vladimir's questions concern the Incarnation, demonstrating that he understands the Christian Gospel and must now decide whether he should receive it. We should note also that in the philosopher's speech Vladimir's last question is: "why was he (Christ) born of a woman, crucified on a tree, and baptized with water?"<sup>45</sup> The question is, in a certain sense, theologically subtle, but more significantly for our purposes it recognizes what I called earlier the often "scandalous" nature of providence, for none of these experiences are what one would expect of God's work in the world.<sup>46</sup> This "scandalous" side of providence is also present in Vladimir's first question to the philosopher, when he quotes the Khazar Jewish delegation and asks whether it is true, as they claimed, that the Greeks and Germans worship one whom the Jews crucified.<sup>47</sup> As noted above, the Greek affirms the fact and then uses it as a basis for his presentation of salvation history. The focus on the Incarnation brings us to the decisive moment. Vladimir must accept or reject Orthodoxy, but the question remains: how is the conversion to be worked out?

As mentioned earlier, at the beginning of the Kherson legend, it is already apparent that Vladimir is God's agent, but the work of providence is presented in the Bible and tradition as the concurrence of human action and the purpose of God. The taking of Kherson provides Vladimir with the conditions in which this concurrence can occur. As in the story of Gideon and the fleece, there is a sense that the events take place outside of time and place. The laconic phrase "and when a year had passed" (и минуvъшию лѣтѣ),

---

<sup>45</sup> "҃то роди отъ жены роди ся и на дрѣвѣ распятъ ся, и водою кръстися?" PVL, 104,19–104,20.

<sup>46</sup> Although naïve in Christian terms, Vladimir's questions are not what have been called "inept questions" in controversy dialogues, as they are not answered by additional questions, but are constructed in such a way as to elicit theological explanations. See Prestel, "They Seeing See Not," 223–234; and Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 12–27.

<sup>47</sup> PVL, 87,4–87,6.

## VLADIMIR'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

coupled with the fact that no motivation or explanation for the attack is provided, gives a transcendent aura to the account and focuses attention on the encounter between Vladimir and God.<sup>48</sup> That a Christian city is attacked is consistent with the frequently “scandalous” nature of providence and indicates that God is able to take the actions of men and turn them to good purpose.<sup>49</sup> Anastasius, who provides the information about the water supply, is a Christian and is an instrument of providence; he is taken to Kiev later by Vladimir and serves the church there. The scandalous side of providential activity is also an important part of one of the most important conversions in the New Testament church, that of St. Paul, and there are several parallels we should note between his experience and that of Vladimir.<sup>50</sup>

First, Paul was a great sinner who persecuted the early Christian church and participated in the martyrdom of St. Stephen. He was traveling to Damascus to capture Christians and bring them to Jerusalem when Christ appeared to him in a vision of light, which blinded him. He was taken into the city, where he only regained his sight after a Christian, Ananias, laid his hand on him.<sup>51</sup> Vladimir, as we have seen, was also a great sinner, whose conversion was precipitated as he was in the process of moving against Christians. Although he did not experience a vision during the siege of Kherson, after he had taken the city he did suffer blindness, which, the chroniclers state occurred through divine providence. Prior to this he had sent word to the Greek Emperors Basil and Constantine that he wished to marry their sister. The emperors replied that this would only be possible if Vladimir accepted Christianity. He indicated that he was ready and the princess was sent to Kherson. When she arrived she told him that his blindness would only

---

<sup>48</sup> *PVL*, 109,1.

<sup>49</sup> Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good for them that love God” (Authorized Version).

<sup>50</sup> Earlier the chronicler refers to the Apostle Paul as the teacher of the Slavs, and thus of the Rus', and this concept merges in the *Primary Chronicle* with the legend of the apostolic visit to Kiev of Andrew to establish apostolic agency in the conversion of Rus'. Poppe writes: “According to the chronicler’s conception, Christ, by the agency of the apostles, had already written the Slavs and the land of Rus’ into the history of salvation,” Poppe, “Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure,” 336. Also see Poppe, “Two Concepts,” 500–501.

<sup>51</sup> Acts 9:17.

be cured upon baptism. He hastened to be baptized and when the Bishop of Kherson laid his hand on Vladimir, the latter immediately recovered his sight, as did Paul at the hand of Ananias.<sup>52</sup> Again we see, in addition to the similarities to St. Paul, typological references to the Old Testament in the form of reverse parallels with Solomon, for just as Solomon was at first virtuous but subsequently led astray by his foreign-born wives, Vladimir was at first a womanizer who was led to baptism by a Christian wife (but also foreign born).

The account of Vladimir's baptism in the *Primary Chronicle* is followed by a refutation of the claim that Vladimir was baptized in Kiev or Vasiliev, and then by a short catechism, presented to Vladimir by priests to protect him against heresy.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps most significantly, Vladimir's successful attack on a Christian city, which was accomplished through divine aid, is brought to a providential conclusion, for we are told that Vladimir gave Kherson back to the Greeks as a wedding payment for his wife.<sup>54</sup>

\* \* \*

In summary, I think that there is significant evidence that one of the chroniclers' major goals, particularly in the depiction of Vladimir's conversion, was to integrate the history—the salvation history—of Rus' into biblical salvation history. For the benefit of Rus', God in his providence conferred an apostolic blessing

---

<sup>52</sup> *PVL*, 11,12–11,15. Some medieval writers, for example, Iakov Mnikh and Ilarion, have made comparisons with the Emperor Constantine, who was also cured of an illness at baptism. For similarities and differences with Constantine see Ranchin, "Khronika Georgiia Amartola," 52–69.

<sup>53</sup> Podskalsky points out that despite the expressed purpose of this confession to protect Vladimir from heresy, an error has crept in, perhaps from a miscopying or a mistranslation of the Greek. The Son is said to be *podobnosushchen* with the Father, rather than *edinosushchen* (of like nature rather than of the same nature, or consubstantial). Podskalsky, "Principal Aspects," 20n90). The Greek terms are *homoiousios* and *homoousios*. The former is a compromise position that came to be associated with Arianism. See *PVL*, 11,2,16–17 and 11,2,19. For further treatment of this issue as well as a broader discussion of Arianism in the theological thought of Kievan Rus' see Podskalsky, "Principal Aspects," 271–274.

<sup>54</sup> Once again we see evidence of the *skandalon* of salvation history, for, as Poppe notes, instead of receiving punishment, Kherson is shown to be blessed by God as the Rus' ruler's baptismal site, "How the Conversion," 301.



## VLADIMIR'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

through the Apostle Andrew, which did not come to full fruition for close to a thousand years. Even during that time, however, providence was visited on Rus' through the divine encouragement and blessing of the more benevolent and virtuous Polianians, through the growth of the Kievan state, and by the conversion of Ol'ga. The reign of Vladimir appears at first to be a setback for Christianity, but the often peculiar working of providence results in the "great sinner" moving toward repentance and conversion. The philosopher's speech sets the course for Vladimir's conversion in at least three ways. First, it emphasizes that throughout history God has worked through individuals and indicated that it is His desire to use Vladimir for his purposes. Second, it focuses on the conversion of the Gentiles, which is a mandate that includes the conversion of Rus'. Third, the account centers the conversion experience in the Incarnation, which Vladimir, in his questions addressed to the philosopher, appears to comprehend and be attracted to. Vladimir's heart and mind are prepared, but his conversion must be delayed pending the arrival of circumstances that favor the concurrence of divine purpose and human agency. The Rus' advisers recommend baptism, but the location and timing are left to the prince. It is finally the siege of Kherson that provides the necessary conditions for conversion. Vladimir moves against a Christian city, but when he promises to be baptized if he is given a victory, God complies and the city falls. Not yet baptized, Vladimir then sends what is essentially a threat to the Greek emperors asking for their sister Anna's hand in marriage. The Greeks accept the offer and Vladimir agrees to accept baptism, but when she arrives, he has still not carried out his side of the agreement. God, however, has caused Vladimir to lose his sight, like the Apostle Paul, and Anna tells him that he will be healed only with baptism. While being baptized, he regains his sight and on his departure for Kiev, turns Kherson back over to the Greeks. Throughout the Kherson account, both Vladimir and God act emphatically, and through his providence, God accepts Vladimir's actions and his desire for baptism and uses them to accomplish his will. Through the concurrence of human agency and divine purpose, Vladimir is now ready to return to Kiev with his Christian wife, priests, and the holy relics of St. Clement in order to accomplish the baptism of his people.<sup>55</sup> Although the seeds of conversion were planted in

---

<sup>55</sup> *PVL*, 116,9–116,12.

DAVID K. PRESTEL

Vladimir by the Greek philosopher, and baptism was conferred by a Greek bishop, the location of the conversion within the siege of Kherson gives Vladimir's decision a degree of independence from Greek influence and emphasizes the spiritual encounter between the Rus' prince and God, which results in Vladimir's own conversion and in the baptism of his people.

## Abbreviations and Works Cited

- Bilaniuk, "Laurentian Chronicle" = Bilaniuk, P. T. "The Laurentian Chronicle as a Witness to Some Distinctive Characteristics of the Religious Culture in Old Rus'." In *The Church and Religious Culture in Old Rus'*. Edited by Norman Ingham. *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 25, nos. 1–4 (1991): 81–102.
- Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* = Bultmann, Rudolf. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by John Marsh. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.
- Butler, *Enlightener of Rus'* = Butler, Francis. *Enlightener of Rus': The Image of Vladimir Sviatoslavich across the Centuries*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2002.
- Cross, *Russian Primary Chronicle* = Cross, Samuel Hazzard, and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor. *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*. Edited and translated with an introduction by Samuel Hazzard Cross. Cambridge, MA: Medieval Society of America, 1953.
- Cullmann, *Christ and Time* = Cullmann, Oscar. *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*. Translated by Floyd V. Filson. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950.
- Cullmann, *Heil als Geschichte* = Cullmann, Oscar. *Heil als Geschichte: Heilsgeschichtliche Existenz in Neuen Testament*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965.
- Demin, "Zametki po personologii" = Demin, A. S. "Zametki po personologii 'Povesti vremennykh let'." *Germenevtika drevnerusskoi literatury* 9 (1998): 52–78.
- Dvornik, *Idea of Apostolicity* = Dvornik, Francis. *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle Andrew*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Eremin, *Lektsii* = Eremin, I. P. *Lektsii po drevnei russkoi literature*. Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1968.
- Eusebius, *History* = Eusebius. *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. Translated by G. A. Williamson. New York: New Dorset Press, 1965.
- Franklin, "Borrowed Time" = Franklin, Simon. "Borrowed Time: Perceptions of the Past in Twelfth-Century Rus'." In *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe*, edited by Paul Magdalino, 157–71. London: Hambledon Press, 1992.
- Franklin, "Some Apocryphal Sources" = Franklin, Simon. "Some Apocryphal Sources of Kievan Russian Historiography." *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s., 15 (1982): 1–27.
- Goetz, "Concept of Time" = Goetz, Hans-Werner. "The Concept of Time in the Historiography of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries." In *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory and Historiography*, edited by Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried and Patrick Geary, 139–165. Washington, DC: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 2002.

DAVID K. PRESTEL

- Khronika Georgiia Amartola = Khronika Georgiia Amartola v drevnem slavianorusskom perevode.* Edited by V. M. Istrin. Reprinted in *Die Chronik des Georgios Hamartolos*. Slavische Propyläen 135, Band I. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972.
- Likhachev, *Povest' vremennykh let = Povest' vremennykh let*, vol. 2. Edited and translated by D. S. Likhachev. Moscow: Akademii nauk SSSR, 1950.
- Löwith, *Meaning in History* = Löwith, Karl. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949.
- Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* = Meyendorff, John. *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1979.
- Müller, "Die Chronik-Erzählung" = Müller, Ludolf. "Die Chronik-Erzählung über die Taufe Vladimirs des Heiligen." In *Slavistische Studien zum X internationalen Slavistenkongress in Sofia 1988*, edited by R. Olesch and H. Rothe, 429–448. Slavistische Forschungen 54. Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1985.
- Müller, *Die Taufe Rußlands* = Müller, Ludolf. *Die Taufe Rußlands: Die Frühgeschichte des russischen Christentums bis zum Jahre 988*. Munich: E. Wewel, 1987.
- Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* = Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Pelikan, "Introduction" = Pelikan, Jaroslav. "Introduction" to *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*. Translated and with Notes by George C. Berthold, 1–13. New York: Paulist Press, 1985.
- Pelikan, *Mystery of Continuity* = Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Mystery of Continuity: Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of Saint Augustine*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986.
- Podskalsky, *Christentum und theologische Literatur* = Podskalsky, Gerhard. *Christentum und theologische Literatur in der kiever Rus' (988–1237)*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982.
- Podskalsky, "Principal Aspects" = Podskalsky, Gerhard. "Principal Aspects and Problems of Theology in Kievan Rus'." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 11 (1987): 270–286.
- Poppe, "Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure" = Poppe, Andrzej. "The Christianization and Ecclesiastical Structure of Kyivan Rus' to 1300." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 21, nos. 3/4 (December 1997): 311–392.
- Poppe, "How the Conversion" = Poppe, Andrzej. "How the Conversion of Rus' Was Understood in the Eleventh Century." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 11 (1987): 287–302.
- Poppe, "Political Background" = Poppe, Andrzej. "The Political Background to the Baptism of Rus': Byzantine Russian Relations between 986–989." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 30 (1976): 197–244. Reprinted in *The Rise of Christian Russia*, 197–244. London: Variorum, 1982.

## VLADIMIR'S CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

- Poppe, "Two Concepts" = Poppe, Andrzej. "Two Concepts of the Conversion of Rus' in Kievan Writings." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1988–89): 488–504.
- PVL = *The Povest' vremennykh let: An Interlinear Collation and Paradosis*. Edited and compiled by Donald Ostrowski; assoc. ed. David Birnbaum. In the Harvard Library of Early Ukrainian Literature, vol. 10 in 3 parts, Cambridge, MA: 2003.
- Prestel, "Plody provideniia" = Prestel, David K. "Plody provideniia: iazycheskaia i sviashchennaia istoriia v Povesti vremennykh let," *Rossica antiqua* (2011/2): 23–42.
- Prestel, "They Seeing See Not" = Prestel, David K. "They Seeing See Not; and Hearing They Hear Not, Neither Do They Understand." *Russian Literature* 34 (1996): 223–234.
- Ranchin, "Khronika Georgiia Amartola" = Ranchin, A. M. Khronika Georgiia Amartola i 'Povest' vremennykh let': Konstantin Ravnoapostol'nyi i kniaz' Vladimir Sviatoslavich." *Germenevtika drevnerusskoi literatury* 10 (2000): 52–69.
- Reed, *Dialogues of the Word* = Reed, Walter L. *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature according to Bakhtin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Shakhmatov, "Povest' vremennykh let" = Shakhmatov, A. A. "Povest' vremennykh let i ee istochniki." *Trudy otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* 4 (1940): 11–150.
- Shakhmatov, *Razyskaniia* = Shakhmatov, A. A. *Razyskaniia o drevnei-shikh letopisnykh svodakh*. St. Petersburg, 1908. Reprint, Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt, 2001.
- Sverdlov, *Domongo'skaia Rus'* = Sverdlov, M. V. *Domongo'skaia Rus': Kniaz' i kniazheskaia vlast' na Rusi VI–pervoi treti XIII vv.* Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2003.
- Tolkovaia Bibliia* = *Tolkovaia Bibliia ili kommentarii na vse knigi sv. Pisanii*. St. Petersburg: Strannik, 1910. Reprinted in a 2nd ed. Stockholm: Institute of Bible Translation, 1987.
- Tupper, *Scandalous Providence* = Tupper, E. Frank. *A Scandalous Providence: The Jesus Story of the Compassion of God*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995.
- Tvorogov, "Povest' vremennykh let" = Tvorogov, O. V. "Povest' vremennykh let i Khronograf po velikomu izlozheniiu." *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* 28 (1974): 99–113.
- Virolainen, "Avtor teksta istorii" = Virolainen, M. N. "Avtor teksta istorii: Siuzhetoobrazovanie v letopisi." In *Avtor i tekst: Sbornik statei*, edited by V. M. Markovich and Wolf Schmidt, 33–52. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo S.-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 1996.
- Vodoff, *Naissance* = Vodoff, V. *Naissance de la Chrétienté russe: La Conversion du Prince Vladimir de Kiev*. Paris: Fayard, 1988.
- Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric* = Wilder, A. *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospels*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.